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TAGS: PHUM KDEM PREL PGOV KCRM SOCI AM AJ

SUBJECT: KHOJALI TRAGEDY: PATRIOTISM, GRIEF, AND A PUSH  
TOWARD GENOCIDE PROSECUTION 14 YEARS LATER

Classified By: DCM JASON HYLAND FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Azerbaijan's commemoration of the Khojali Massacre (a 1992 attack by Armenian forces that resulted in the death of a reported 613 civilians) contained a decidedly political message this year, with pointed outreach to the international community and a disturbing uptick in anti-Armenian rhetoric. At events organized by the MFA and the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party, GOAJ officials called upon the international community to hold the Armenians responsible for "genocide" committed in Khojali and elsewhere. The MFA also announced plans to prosecute 72 Armenians for genocide and asked for the international community's help in arresting those individuals through Interpol red notices. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) The Foreign Ministry kicked off the weekend's commemorations with a 90-minute briefing for the diplomatic community on February 24. During the briefing, officials from the MFA, parliament and military prosecutor's office outlined legal efforts to prosecute those responsible for the massacre. With July 2005 amendments to the Azerbaijani criminal code that recognize the crime of genocide, the GOAJ has now opened a criminal case against 72 (presumably Armenian) individuals. According to the Deputy Military Prosecutor, the GOAJ has requested that Interpol issue red notices for the 72. GOAJ officials asked for the international community's help in bringing these individuals to justice, complaining that parliaments all over the world focused attention on the "unsubstantiated Armenian claims of genocide" while ignoring the atrocities and war crimes committed by Armenians against Azerbaijanis over the last 200 years. The briefing closed with a screening of a short film on the massacre that contained repeated comparisons of Khojali to the Holocaust and anti-Armenian rhetoric that bordered on incitement.

YAP ORGANIZES POLITICAL COMMEMORATION

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¶3. (C) At a commemoration held on February 25, the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party (YAP) managed to keep domestic politics largely out of the speeches. Only one oblique reference was made to the fact that the government at the time (headed by Ayaz Mutallibov, now a minor opposition figure) bears some responsibility for the events. YAP Secretary General Ali Akhmedov played master of ceremonies as the event began with a 15-minute video of the massacre, including showing the same clips of mangled corpses twice. Speakers, who ranged from current MPs to IDPs from both Khojali and the occupied territories, criticized Armenians and criticized the international community for not recognizing the massacre and not doing more to solve the conflict. Several speakers stated that these events "prove" the very nature of Armenians. One individual went so far as to say it should not be called "Armenian fascism," but rather simply

"Armenianism." He and others went on to list atrocities committed by Armenians dating back 100 years. Another speaker criticized the fact that the Ambassadors representing the Minsk Group Co-Chairs were not present. Speakers urged those present not to forget the injustices done to the "peace-loving" and tolerant Azerbaijanis and to spread the word internationally about what has been done to them. The Government also organized a public wreath-laying at the monument to the Khojali victims. Given the nature of the speeches and the extensive news coverage of the event, one came away with the sense that the massacre had been used more to prove a political purpose (i.e. criticizing the international community and taking another opportunity to vilify Armenians) than to honor the memory of those who died.

DIASPORA IS ENCOURAGED TO WORK HARDER

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¶4. (SBU) In addition to domestic events, the national press provided in-depth coverage of the way Azerbaijanis in different countries commemorated the event. Diaspora in 15 countries organized protests to bring attention to the Khojali massacre. The State Committee on Work with Azerbaijanis Abroad funded some of these activities. Apart from GOAJ-supported diaspora organizations, Turks and Turkish-Azerbaijani communities demonstrated their solidarity and marched on the streets of European cities.

TELEVISION COVERAGE PROMOTES PATRIOTISM

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¶5. (SBU) Television coverage over the February 25-26 weekend focused heavily on the anniversary. TV stations combined a

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mix of gruesome footage and patriotic programming. In contrast to previous years (when TV channels refrained from broadcasting any entertainment programs during the two-day commemoration), music programs with a patriotic touch were aired. Other programs concentrated on the heroism and bravery of Azerbaijanis during different battles in the history of the country. Channels also showed two new movies about Khojali as well as several historic programs on Armenian attacks and occupation of Azerbaijani lands throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Political parties, civil society and youth organizations also organized this year to call for increased public awareness and to work more effectively to publish books, to produce movies, and by other means deliver a strong message to the international community.

COMMENT

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¶6. (C) Remembering Khojali has become a unifying event in Azerbaijan. Described as one of the most tragic events in modern Azerbaijan's history, Khojali scenes are replayed year after year and published repeatedly to keep alive the cruelty and brutality of those events. This year's events had a decidedly international element, with a pointed message to the international community that Azerbaijan had suffered injustices at the hands of the Armenians that must be addressed. The uptick in anti-Armenian rhetoric, alleging centuries of genocide and vilifying Armenians as inherently cruel people, also is a new element to the commemorations. We are concerned that the weekend's events, particularly those sanctioned by the GOAJ, served only to widen the divide between Armenians and Azerbaijanis and make an eventual peace process that much more difficult.

HARNISH